

## **Science, Policy, and Partners: A case study of the success of salmon recovery planning in the Snohomish River Basin**

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The Snohomish Basin Salmon Recovery Forum (Forum) developed what is considered to be one of the most comprehensive and focused salmon conservation plans in Puget Sound. The keys to the success of the *Snohomish Basin Salmon Conservation Plan* (Snohomish Basin Salmon Recovery Forum, 2005) are a strong foundation, scientific findings, policy directions, and partnerships.

### **Background**

The Snohomish River basin is the second largest in Puget Sound and home to nine salmonid species. Two of these, the Puget Sound Chinook and bull trout char are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. Chinook populations are at less than 10% of historical abundance. The size of the basin and its relatively undeveloped state make it a critical basin for recovery. The basin has the largest number of coho spawners between the Columbia River and Canadian border and produces an estimated 25-50% of the wild coho in Puget Sound.

Around Puget Sound, local governments and interest groups wanted to develop a response to the listings that retained local flexibility and control while contributing to the regional solution. In the Snohomish river basin, the salmon recovery planning work is led by the 39-member Snohomish Basin Salmon Recovery Forum. This coalition includes two counties, one tribe, 14 cities, special purpose districts such as a Port and conservation districts, numerous interest groups (agriculture, business, and environmental), and citizens. A draft plan was completed in mid-2004 and a final plan is slated for completion by June 2005. This plan will become a chapter in the regional recovery plan for Chinook and bull trout. Keys to the success of this effort are outlined below.

### **Key to Success: Plan Foundation**

There are two parts to the successful foundation. One is the Forum itself and the other is early guidance that set the direction for the plan. Although the official threatened species listings occurred in 1999, a cooperative effort to address basin-wide salmon conservation needs started in 1994. Although membership periodically changes due to elections and staff changes, the group has learned to work together to understand one another's diverse viewpoints and find mutually agreeable solutions. In 2001, the completion of an interim plan was an important learning step. In 2003, the Forum conducted a membership review and adjusted representation including adding more agricultural representatives. One of the new agricultural representatives in particular was instrumental in helping to overcome past miscommunication with local farmers.

The Forum's early guidance for the plan also helped set the stage for success. The guidance included:

- Support for a strong, defensible scientific foundation.
- Focus on multi-salmon species solutions (especially for coho). The Forum stated that they did want to avoid more listings and the need to redo this work in the future.
- Incorporation of cultural and community values.
- An "early and often" outreach strategy for community groups.
- Focus on where actions will make the most difference while recognizing that all of the basin will play a role in recovery.
- Following regional and state guidance.
- Making the plan readable and practical.

### **Key to Success: Scientific Approach**

The Forum relies on the Snohomish Basin Salmonid Recovery Technical Committee for scientific work. This committee is composed of scientists from Forum member agencies and organizations, as well as federal representatives from NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Forest Service. The Technical Committee developed the *Ecological Analysis for Salmonid Conservation* as part of a case study with the Puget Sound Chinook Technical Recovery Team. The goals of the *Ecological Analysis for Salmonid Conservation* were to 1) integrate existing and ongoing inventories and analyze into one framework; 2) update an interim strategy that had been developed in 2001

to incorporate new data, broaden to include other salmonid species, and provide long-term guidance on what actions are needed and where to recover viable salmonid populations; and 3) assist the Forum in developing and evaluating alternatives. The Technical Committee identified the key limiting factors for Chinook, bull, and coho salmon as proxy species for the salmonids in the basin. They then developed a basin-wide recovery hypothesis for recovery that included habitat, harvest, and hatcheries. They also grouped the 63 sub-basins into 12 sub-basin strategy groups based on similarities in landform, Chinook and bull trout use, and the conditions of watershed processes. Hypotheses were developed for each of the sub-basin strategy groups. This step was successful because of:

- Strong leadership from the chair of the committee.
- A long history of working together cooperatively.
- Additional staff from NOAA Fisheries.
- Chinook Technical Recovery Team involvement in the development of the strategy.
- Access to two models.
- Ongoing coordination with Forum staff about the hypotheses and sub-basin strategy groups.

### **Key to Success: Policy Direction – Vision for Recovery and Actions**

The Forum's key policy directions are based on the scientific work. The steps and outcomes include:

- **Selecting an approach to recovery.** The Forum evaluated and ranked three approaches and used this information to come up with a recommendation. This process allowed them to explore and understand differences within the group.
- **Selecting a level of effort.** The Forum next evaluated and ranked four levels of increased effort and selected the second highest. Forum members who originally wanted either the next highest or next lowest level expressed what they needed in order to support the chosen effort. One of these was to include a strong adaptive management program. The plan includes 10-year quantitative milestones.
- **Building on past accomplishments.** Putting collective accomplishments in the plan was an effective way to acknowledge past and ongoing contributions to recovery.
- **Creating approaches for key land uses and interest groups.** These are cooperative, supportive efforts for agriculture, forestry, cities, rural residential areas, and roads and utilities. Both county agricultural advisory boards support for the approaches.
- **Including a mix of tools for habitat protection across the basin.** This includes policy and regulatory guidance, role of mitigation funding, building stewardship and implementation capacity, developing and encouraging use of incentives and other innovative approaches, and compliance.
- **Identifying specific needs, approaches, and actions for the 12 sub-basin strategy groups.** These are focused, practical recommendations. To develop the list of possible capital projects, local agency planners and biologists met with farmers and others to identify ideas and concerns.
- **Making implementation commitments.** Each of the Forum members passed resolutions or wrote letters to outline their specific commitments, as well as conditions they need to implement their portion of the plan (such as additional funding).

### **Key to Success: Partners**

The Forum partnerships are critical of the success of the plan and ultimately for implementation. Their success can be attributed to:

- A high level of participation plus trust and collaboration (and humor)
- Using a consensus continuum that allows members to be in agreement while acknowledging differences
- A committed, consistent, and strong chair
- Active participation by Tulalip Tribes for both scientific work, projects, and policy direction
- Active leadership by farmers
- Dedicated staff
- Acknowledgment of contributions at the regional level including receiving an award for the draft plan